

UNANIMOUS CONSENT REQUEST—  
EXECUTIVE CALENDAR

Mr. TESTER. Mr. President, I would ask unanimous consent that the Senate proceed to executive session to consider the following nominations en bloc: Calendar Nos. 151, 152, 153, and 154; that those nominations be confirmed en bloc; that the motions to reconsider be considered made and laid upon the table with no intervening action or debate; that no further motions be in order to any of the nominations; and that the President be immediately notified of the Senate's action and the Senate then resume legislative session.

The PRESIDING OFFICER. Is there objection?

The Senator from Tennessee is recognized.

Mrs. BLACKBURN. Mr. President, I reserve the right to object, and I rise to object to this unanimous consent request.

The VA, for years, has made promises that they have year after year failed to meet. For years, veterans and their family members have called my office, whether I was in the State senate or over in the House or here in the Senate. They are distressed by the lack of service they receive from the VA. My caseworkers would work tirelessly with these constituents, only to end up frustrated by a very unresponsive VA. This is unacceptable. It has become the culture of the VA, and this is something that has to change.

Now, for weeks, the committee has been asking for feedback on legislative proposals which have the potential to affect the workflow and the capacity of the VA. The VA has been silent on this even though we have asked for their views and have asked them to weigh in. The reason we have asked them for this is the VA has a backlog of over 180,000 cases. Their wait times this year have continued to escalate. They are not going down.

So, yesterday, I had a call with Secretary McDonough expressing my concerns with the lack of feedback that the committee has received on what is shaping up to be the most consequential legislative effort in the veterans space in an entire generation. The formal response that I received today was incomplete, but it contained a promise that they would have more fulsome feedback by July 30.

I will continue to keep my hold on these pending VA nominees until I receive the official views on the COST of War Act, on the toxic exposures bills. We owe our veterans. We owe it to them to get this right. Therefore, I object to the unanimous consent request, and I will continue my hold on these nominees.

The PRESIDING OFFICER. Objection is heard.

The Senator from Montana is recognized.

UNANIMOUS CONSENT REQUEST—  
CALENDAR NO. 153

Mr. TESTER. Mr. President, I will rephrase this one more time.

I would ask unanimous consent that the Senate proceed to executive session to consider the following nomination: Calendar No. 153—for those who want to know, that is Matthew T. Quinn of Montana; that the nomination be confirmed and the motion to reconsider be considered made and laid upon the table with no intervening action or debate; that no further motions be in order to any other nomination; and that the President be immediately notified of the Senate's action and the Senate resume legislative session.

The PRESIDING OFFICER. Is there objection?

Mrs. BLACKBURN. I object.

The PRESIDING OFFICER. Objection is heard.

Mr. TESTER. Mr. President.

The PRESIDING OFFICER. The Senator from Montana is recognized.

Mr. TESTER. Last month, four well-qualified, noncontroversial nominees were unanimously voted out of the Veterans' Affairs Committee—unanimously voted out of the Veterans' Affairs Committee, which Senator BLACKBURN sits on. Here is who these people are:

Don Remy, a veteran, has been nominated as VA Deputy Secretary—VA Deputy Secretary. That is second in command. If Senator BLACKBURN wants quick reaction from the VA on toxic exposure, maybe Senator BLACKBURN shouldn't hold that nominee of the No. 2 position of the Department, a nominee specifically tasked with coordinating VA's work with the Defense Department, which includes issues like—guess what—toxic exposure. But that is all right. We will leave him sitting at home. We will leave the veterans out in the cold.

Then there is Patricia Ross, who is nominated to be Assistant Secretary for Congressional Affairs. So if Senator BLACKBURN wants more information from the VA on legislation and how much it costs, maybe the Senator shouldn't hold the nominee tasked with getting that information from the VA to Congress, but she is.

Then, there is Maryanne Donaghy, nominated as Assistant Secretary for Accountability and Whistleblower Protection. I want to tell you that whistleblowers regularly come to us with reports of waste, fraud, and abuse.

Folks love to condemn the VA—we've heard a lot about it a second ago—when it fails to hold its workforce accountable. I recommend that, if Senator BLACKBURN wants to request accountability at the VA, maybe the Senator shouldn't hold the nominee tasked with employee accountability and whistleblower protection.

Then, there is Matt Quinn—someone that I know very, very well because he comes from the State of Montana—for director of cemetery affairs. So when people die, no one is there in the VA to take care of this issue.

Once again, all four people—critically important people—whom the Senator voted for to get out of committee are now being held by the Senator.

I am going to tell you that, if we want to hold the VA accountable today in a situation where we are coming out of a pandemic, this is not the way to do it. The bottom line is that if you want a VA that can function, then, we have to have that VA staffed up.

Don't talk to me or anybody else in this body about distressed veterans and then say: You know what. We are going to stop the No. 2. We are going to stop the VA person who is supposed to talk to us. We are going to stop the cemetery person. We will stop the whistleblower person. That is really helping veterans.

Quite frankly, it is just the contrary.

I pride myself on running a committee that is very bipartisan, and the VA Committee may be the best, not because of me but because of people like JERRY MORAN, JOHN BOOZMAN, people like PATTY MURRAY. Those people step up to the plate every day, and they do what is right for veterans.

Let's talk about the toxic exposure bill. Let's talk about that bill. In World War I, we had mustard gas. The VA had no capacity to deal with those veterans. In World War II, we had radiation. The VA had no capacity. In the Vietnam war, we had Agent Orange. And, by the way, they died, they died, and they died again because this body refuses to give the VA the tools they need to take care of our veterans, and now we are doing the same thing with burn pits.

I am here to tell you that I had a veteran stand up in my very first year on the VA Committee. A Vietnam veteran stood up in the back of the room in a townhall and said: You are not going to treat this generation of veterans like you treated ours, the Vietnam veterans.

Well, I tell you what: If we want to close the door and we want to delay and we want to push back what is going on with burn pits, then, let's have them die.

You were at the hearing that the lung transplant guy was at. We had to juggle that hearing so he could even be at it because he was on medication.

The bottom line is people are dying every day.

By the way, we are still not done with Agent Orange, hypertension, and MGUS, which are in this bill. They will die. Some more of them will die.

We send our young people off to war. They come back changed, and we don't have the guts to step up and debate the bill. When I give the ranking member the authority to stop that bill from coming to the floor, we are still going to make excuses? Give me a break.

I am going to tell you what. I have been in this body for probably too long. We turn around and we try to do the right things, and we have people who say: You know, send our young people off to war at the drop of the hat. Send them off to war. Send them off to war.